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ABSTRACT

The Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) movement has gone from valuable but less effective individual efforts to organized, district- and campus-supported projects based on goals for improved student learning in every area and every program. On the college level, WAC takes two forms: a more traditional, formally structured approach from faculty whose goals are based on teaching the writing of a discipline; and a more flexible perspective of writing as a thinking process that is fundamental to understanding, termed "Writing for Learning." Writing for Learning consists of a multitude of activities, all designed to lead students to interact with content in ways that result in increased learning. Students write in class or out of class, by themselves or in groups, sometimes cued and sometimes self-designed, to generate ideas or respond to someone else's ideas--whatever seems appropriate for the learning strategy they are practicing. The implementation of this approach at South Mountain Community College began with an effort to convince instructors of the need for more writing, the need for different kinds of writing, and the need for a different view of what teaching writing is. Subsequent steps included gathering administrative support, enlisting faculty, training faculty to plan and design writing assignments, and offering workshops for faculty on the use of writing in the classroom, covering note taking, class logs, study guides, writing assignments, essay tests, and conference evaluations. New efforts are being planned to expand the program to focus on still more student needs. (AYC)

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WRITING FOR LEARNING

IN THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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In the late 70's and early 80's, the National Institute of Education funded a three-year project entitled "Literacy Development in the Community College" for the purpose of describing the realities of reading and writing in the community college. The resulting project data documented a diminishing role for writing in that context and noted some general understandings and tacit agreements about easing writing requirements that had evolved between students and teachers. Although this in-depth study of twenty-six classrooms revealed that writing was taking place, its nature and functions were somewhat surprising. Very little of it was concerned with generating language. the short answer or worksheet "fill-in," the end-of-chapter question response, the prescribed-form laboratory report, listed records of observations and activities--these were the general practice. While students worked at improving their composing skills in their English classes, beyond that they needed only to be adequate note-takers (which many weren't) and objective test-takers to survive in college. So little actual composing was seen that instruction in improving writing seemed anachronistic, where students learned a skill already obsolete in a context where their role required only passive literacy skills, where they operated only as receivers, not generators, of language.

Not to suggest that instructors had adapted to this non-writing environment by choice--few if any felt that the situation was appropriate. For the most part, their adaptation was a result of frustration and resignation, not approval. But their students' persistent lack of growth in writing skills was beyond their individual influence.

Although the published results of the literacy study caused some controversy, we can note some positive results. The greatest of these, in my perspective, was the renewed attention given to

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writing. It had become obvious that students weren't writing as well or as much as they should; and adjunct studies made it clear that they had little value for writing and engaged in it as little as possible--initiated it seldom, if ever. And the time was right nationwide, too; faculty began to pay attention to the persistent rumors they had heard both on campus and beyond, from within their own fields and outside, the message that students, if they are to be really educated, need to write. Finding receptive or at least open audiences, those of us who had always been hawking writing began talking about how it could benefit our students and ourselves. Suddenly we were in the middle of Writing Across the Curriculum. In the three years since then, the movement has gone from valuable but less effective individual efforts that had existed here and there to organized, district and campus supported projects based on goals for improved student learning in every area, every program.

WRITING TO LEARN WRITING. On the college level, Writing Across the Curriculum presently takes two forms, or perhaps attitudes. These are different not in the sense of opposition but in focus, in a sense of goal and emphasis. On the one hand, we have a more traditional, formally structured approach from faculty whose goals are based on teaching the writing of a discipline. They teach students how to produce the writing considered important in their field, usually by designing writing-intensive courses in which students practice the process of writing as it is done in their particular discipline. The outcome is the appropriate product, the important content and form. Common approaches and tools include tutors, writing centers or labs, and extra skill teaching sessions, either required or optional.

This approach to writing is extremely valuable and we should continue it. For the first time, some students now recognize the need to write and experience some success in doing it. They are

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learning something in their coursework that they need to know that they were missing before. We all support these efforts. But our WAC project also goes much further, in a much more subtle, nicely insidious effort toward growth in writing.

WRITING TO LEARN. The second approach to Writing Across the Curriculum with its less formal and more flexible perspective is the program of the day in community colleges--and of the future. This is Writing for Learning, which we define as the kind of writing that is fundamental to understanding, writing as a thinking process. Our Writing for Learning program consists of a multitude of activities, all designed to lead students to interact with content in ways that result in increased learning. Students write in class or out of class, by themselves or in groups, sometimes cued and sometimes self-designed, to generate ideas or respond to someone else's or to evaluate their progress, whatever seems appropriate for the learning strategy they are practicing.

Writing for Learning is a new concept for many community college faculty members, something they have never considered for their courses. The more traditional use of writing, assigning the "papers" they all learned to write in college, was their only experience, and those who felt reluctant to take on the responsibilities of a writing-intensive approach saw no other way to emphasize writing. Still their concern for their students' lack of writing skills remained, making them good candidates for a campus-wide WAC project.

When we started, it was not difficult to find consensus on the gravity of the situation; not only did these teachers agree that student writing was poor, they knew that without some change other serious problems would continue. Students would choose classes with few or no demands for writing, those faculty who still required

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writing would feel pressured to give it up, and all of us would continue to graduate students whose writing embarrassed us.

We needed to convince teachers in every field that not only is being able to write critical, but also that other kinds of learning suffer or are only minimally achieved without it. Fortunately, it was to a receptive audience, for the most part, that we began explaining our Writing for Learning concept. We talked about how writing could benefit both students and instructors. We knew we couldn't ask teachers in other disciplines to assign writing and to encourage good writing for the sake of the English teacher or probably not even because it builds general skills, but we could show them that doing would improve their students' growth in their own fields.

We set about to explain what Writing Across the Curriculum meant and to help these instructors devise functional ways to use writing in their classroom to improve student learning. Basically, we described the the need for more writing, believing that students who write only in their English classes perceive writing as a narrow skill, one that is not too useful. Their goal is getting through the course and getting beyond any demands for writing. We were convinced many students wouldn't survive in college unless they received more instruction in writing and more practice and reinforcement of writing skills than Freshman English classes could possibly provide. And if they don't learn to use writing for studying and learning, we said, they may find they can't learn enough to be successful students.

We also discussed the need for different kinds of writing. Since the dominant use of writing in many courses had largely become the restatement of given information, students were serving only as containers for others' ideas, possessing what Freedman calls a "diminished, impoverished conception of writing," due to their

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limited experience in form, purpose, and audience. We talked instead of expressive writing, writing that would allow them to concentrate on ideas, to think on paper, the "How do I know what I think until I see what I say," the automatic reaching for a pencil that means, "let me think about it." We mentioned working out connections, becoming aware of how things fit, identifying what we think and know, the kind of writing that involves generating one's own ideas, not transcribing fully formed concepts from other sources. We tried to make it clear to our colleagues that when we use writing only to test--especially when students only give back information--we are not developing independent thinkers. How can we expect students to be able to think imaginatively--or consider it important--if we don't ask them to practice it?

Finally, we talked about the <u>need for a different view of what teaching writing is</u>. It was vital that instructors in other disciplines understood that they didn't have to become grammar teachers--that the movement is definitely not "grammar across the curriculum." (This idea is one of the greatest problems to overcome in successfully encouraging many teachers to incorporate writing into their courses. Many instructors outside the English department feel inadequate or at least uncomfortable about evaluating student writing, still believing they need to be able to expertly analyze and correct mechanical errors.) Specific problems of language, we assured them, are the job of the English teacher. Teachers in other disciplines don't have to--probably shouldn't--evaluate writing in terms of its surface features, but look instead at meaning, at clarity, at what the writer has said and what ideas he has chosen to frame or support his thought. We as English teachers would speak to the student about style and technique and, of course, about correctness. Sometimes it took a good deal of talking and often some group experience in evaluating writing, but most teachers recognized that they have an intuitive skill for knowing good

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writing. They are, after all, much more knowleugeable than we about writing in their own disciplines; they know how historians or mathematicians write for other historians and mathematicians. We don't.

How then, did we start? We gathered administrative support on a theoretical level (that's easy, there's a wealth of very credible information to support the value of using writing for learning) and on a practical level (that's harder, except that some good Writing Across the Curriculum programs have shown that a very small financial reward suggests to teachers that their efforts are recognized and equally small extended or released time arrangements can persuade campus Writing Coordinators to devote a great deal of time). Then we enlisted faculty, beginning with those who had or would make the time, people who hadn't reached a cynical stage about student writing or their own work, people who were movers and leaders among their colleagues. Their support for the idea gave it the credibility and the steadiness it needed.

We made all faculty involvement voluntary, never making the slightest implication that using writing in content area courses is "expected." We offered help in overcoming the greatest problems faculty members brought to the effort--ways to deal with matters of time and felt lack of expertise. In other words, before participants could start to worry about how adding writing to their courses would affect their already crowded syllabus, we showed them how writing needn't replace anything they consider vital. And we handled the biggest block of all by showing them ways to evaluate writing that they could easily handle--after convincing them that they really didn't need to "correct" everything their students wrote.

We recruited faculty and then, through workshops and individual

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contact, we helped them plan and design writing assignments. We met together to share the successes and admit our other attempts; we continued to encourage each other to experiment and take risks, to try whatever might work; and we always emphasized the value of what we were doing for students. We made records of our efforts by gathering examples and compiling materials, so that over time, we can document what we and they learn. In addition, we tried to promote their expectations of continuing the effort by focusing on revising their writing assignments, leading to their perceptions of writing as an on-going part of their course.

Our writing project plan was recruitment, information, and reward--all three centered on student growth. We talked about the need to get students involved, about overcoming passivity, about reorienting the externally controlled, about changing expectations that they are there to be "taught." We tried to convince teachers that writing--in and outside of class--would help their students learn more by improving their understanding, concentration, and remembering; that it would help them learn better, because the imprint is deeper and more permanent; and that it would as well help them learn differently, as they work at more abstract levels: generalizing, making inferences, synthesizing, thinking.

We suggested that writing would stimulate students' sense of responsibility for learning and help them develop the skills and the strategies that can give them control over their learning, give them more ability to consciously direct their own learning. And we made the point that students who are able to sense their own progress and growth, see gains in their own abilities to achieve, are more likely to persist, to stay in school.

In other words, in our project we demonstrate how instructors can use writing in their classes to develop skills for learning any and

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all content material, through presentations or workshop sessions on such skills as:

Note-taking. We talk to faculty about what students write in class, whether their notes are useful, help them learn, help them study for tests--whether they are able to process the information presented, sort out the most important points and relate significant supporting ideas so they can see the content as an integrated, connected whole, so they know what to learn. We present a basic, easy-to-learn, discipline adaptable notetaking system that students can pick up in as little as one class period or even outside of class through the writing center. It's a writing-for-learning activity students can then practice in every course they take.

Class Logs. We question whether students are active participants in the classroom or whether their uninvolved passivity prevents them from interacting with ideas and each other. Do they ask the kinds of questions that help them learn more or the kinds of questions that let instructors know what they don't understand? Can they integrate their learning?

We suggest the interactive learning log, a new approach to writing-for-learning that combines the best of the traditional journal and the information processing notetaking system. Students practice writing notes, but then go beyond recording and personally respond to and interact with the material. They learn what it is, what it means, and how it fits into or with their existing knowledge.

Study Guides. How do students direct their own learning, handle their text assignments? Can they process print, summarize important information, choose what to emphasize, study, or learn? Or do

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instructors need to use study guides to pattern the kinds of thinking students need to practice by providing writing assignments that cue student responses?

Well planned study guides can help students interact with texts, examine their own assumptions, make inferences, recognize and understand and internalize concepts instead of memorizing facts. Study guides can provide the direction and the practice students need to become independent learners.

Writing assignments. Many faculty believe writing assignments are important, that they help students to learn, but they are nevertheless reluctant to make such assignments because they don't feel they can carry it off successfully--they think they don't know how to coach writing or evaluate it. We introduce them to the microtheme, a useful writing tool for in-class work and outside assignments that practices particular discipline-specific writing skills. The microtheme is not time-consuming, and it can be evaluated quickly and in a number of ways--as groups, by peers, or through a simple scanning by the teacher.

These short bits of writing give students a chance to learn content and organizational skills without giving them a major project. They are encouraging rather than discouraging; they seem possible--even easy--rather than frightening; in other words, they enable rather than block. And they are extremely flexible; easy to design and describe, they can be used in any situation.

Essay tests. We talk about whether students know how to create expectations of success in their reader, or themselves. Can they accurately analyze the demands of essay tests--read the directions and know what to do? Do they understand the importance of the first impression, can they design a dazzling beginning that will set up

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their response? They also need to know how to develop their main points, integrating their supporting data in a way that lets them show what they know in the most advantageous manner. Finally, they need to understand how essential it is to provide a satisfactory conclusion, reinforcing the impression that they have answered the question knowledgeably and completely.

An instructor who uses essay tests knows that they can become learning situations in themselves, not just measuring learning but inducing it. Students learn to prepare differently, and they become better learners as well as better writers because of the experience. This is another skill, rather like note-taking, that can be presented in or outside of class in a single session and then practiced throughout the course.

Conference evaluations. The opportunity to talk to students about course content through the vehicle of evaluating their writing is a valuable opportunity for instructors. The two- or five-minute conference, focusing on a single point of content, doesn't take a lot of time, doesn't overwhelm the student with more information than he or she can cope with, and lets both teacher and students concentrate on one goal at a time, demonstrating that writing, learning really, is a step by step process. This method makes the task manageable for all concerned, and because the instructor defines the steps and the order, he or she has control over how the students learn the process. The problem of coaching writing becomes simplified, and both teacher and student gain confidence.

Once instructors hear about the idea of incorporating writing into their classes and several simple ways to go about it, they are quick to try it out. Their first attempt invariably focuses on some problem they have long been concerned about: students who take

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unusable notes or notes that lack personal understanding, those who passively sit through a class period, never connecting or becoming involved, students who give up (or never buy) the text because they can't process print effectively, or those who see tests as an exercise in parroting back the facts. Whether instructors present the new assignments themselves or involve the writing coordinator in some way depends upon their goals for the work and their confidence in being able to direct it.

At the present time, the future of the writing for learning program seems assured; the commitment seems well founded in both faculty and administrative support. This fall we will branch out into several new efforts as part of an integrated project focusing on still more student needs. One area, offered to all faculty members, will provide more workshops or presentations for their students through the learning center, with content designed together by the writing coordinator and the instructor to deal with whatever writing problems students present or strategies they need to learn and practice. A second effort will attempt to deal with an ever-present problem in two-year schools, especially on smaller campuses, that of delivering advanced courses in disciplines where limited enrollment usually means canceled sections. This plan calls for the writing coordinator to develop a system and a format, using writing, that will result in a bank of available courses in which students can enroll as independent study (directed by faculty so that less self-directed students can manage the responsibility) on a more cost-effective basis than running a class for four or five. Finally, since computer literacy is a high priority of the community college, the third area of the program will investigate present uses of computers in teaching composition and pilot an initial attempt in Freshman English. And the entire project will be interwoven through an outreach program, supported in concept by the Maricopa District and funded at South Mountain by the Ford Foundation, which will let

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us work at improving articulation with our high schools and our transfer universities, a long overdue effort that should help us in attracting students and improving their chances of success.

Our plans are ambitious, but our need is very high. The community college serves a special population, and very often, time and money are the primary considerations of our students. Effective and efficient instruction can't be just words in our programs; our students need to get on with it--they see themselves as already late in starting and their patience is limited. We think that writing is one way to help them toward success. At the very least, the writing strategies approach makes it clear to students that there are problems in their learning systems. At the most, writing becomes the integrating instrument, the key to learning to learn.

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